

The Silent and the Small
Mark 4: 26-34
June 27, 1971
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There they were: twelve individuals against the whole world. Gradually, they had come to sense that the venture they had joined would not be easy. They had begun on the basis that this Jesus was the fulfillment of their nation's hopes and dreams. Just as he had reached into their lives and enlisted them in his cause, so they expected that they, with him, would appeal successfully to the hearts and minds of their countrymen. It must have been dismaying and disappointing and shattering to them to witness what was really happening. Instead of successfully appealing to the hearts and minds of their countrymen, they were succeeding only in alienating them, particularly the ones who mattered most. The scribes and pharisees and priests not only failed to welcome them with open arms, but instead were indignant at their audacity, and suspicious of their motives, and furious at their behavior. Not only were they not riding the wave-crest of popularity and success, instead they sensed a growing isolation.

And so I imagine them sitting up late in the evening talking about their unexpected predicament. Today we would call it discussing the viability of their project. What chances did it have for success? What realistic possibilities were there. The Long Range Planners and Systems Analysts among them would have measured the data and concluded very quickly that this venture just didn't have a prayer and ought to be dropped.

I can imagine them talking like that, and I can imagine Jesus hearing their concern, and understanding the very real and very human anxiety. I can imagine him being sympathetic. And whenever this particular thing happened, and it must have happened often, he would respond gently, firmly, empathetically, in a way that did not shame them, nor make them embarrassed at their ineptitude. He would do it by returning to the heart of the message - the very essence of the Good News - the basic philosophy of the eventure, if you will.

It was this: God has begun to do a new thing in the confines of human

history. He has planted a seed - a very small seed. But because he has planted - because it is his world in which he has planted it - it will grow, quietly, inconspicuously. He has established his kingdom on earth: it is already in our midst. It will never, henceforth, be overturned or turned back. It is now part of the permanent furniture of human history. Your job is to know that fact, derive hope from it, live out of it, and in your living affirm the reality of this new thing everywhere you go: when you do this - the Kingdom that is in our midst will be made clear for others to see. You will bear in your being - the very Kingdom of God.

That, I would suggest, is the distilled essence of the New Testament Lesson which I read to you this morning. In this instance he used two very brief parables, both of which have had great meaning for Christians down through the centuries. The seed sown in the ground, mysteriously germinating and growing and finally bearing fruit. The mustard seed - the traditional idiom for smallness - which slowly becomes a substantial tree of ten feet - again, a traditional idiom for strength and permanence.

It worked. It did give them hope and courage and conviction in the face of incredible odds. They kept the faith and lived it because they were convinced that the seed was planted: that regardless of the relative success or failure of their efforts, they were involved in the new thing God was doing.

In John Steinbeck's great novel, The Grapes of Wrath, the strange country preacher, Casey, put it rather well. "One person, with their mind made up, can shove a lot of folks around." That's descriptive of what happened as a result of those twelve men.

It was a timely and relevant and essential word to the disciples as they contemplated the future. It remains so for us. For we live in a time when many people are ready to throw in the towel on the Christian venture. We live in a time when the institutional church goes from crisis to crisis, when the traditional piety of the American people which once found a home in the church, now is past - or is expressed quite apart from and sometimes in opposition to

the church. We live in a time when the word seems to be that our venture is dead. That we are barking up the wrong tree: that we are irrelevant: that our project is no longer viable. In one way or another every honest Christian has thought those thoughts. It is one of the realities of churchmanship in our time. It is expressed, perhaps most graphically, in the continuing exodus from the ranks of the clergy, of some of the most creative and articulate men and women we have. Roman Catholic and Protestant alike. And as they exit, they do so wistfully, with a lingering look over the shoulder, wishing that they could stay, but having come to the agonizing decision that the project is no longer viable.

And those who stay do so, I believe, because of a deep belief that the essence of these two little parables, is still very relevant. We are involved in something far greater than our individual efforts. The Kingdom of God is still in our midst, and even though we may not be winning the battle today, the kingdom in our midst transcends us - and our work - and our hopes and will be a reality in the life of mankind until that life is no more.

Now, that is all pretty theological and pretty personal and its sometimes not too real as we sit in a sanctuary on a hot summer morning wishing we were somewhere else, or when we struggle with the common everyday mechanics of being a church in Lafayette, Indiana. Yet it is a perspective we need and I would invite you to think with me about the implications.

Jesus used a mustard seed to illustrate the reality of the Kingdom of God. Small in its beginnings, one day it is great and big and strong. Christian history, itself, is the best illustration that his dictum was true. Think about the Christmas story. The Scottish poet George MacDonald said it beautifully:

"They all were looking for a king

To slay their foes and lift them high:

Thou cam'st, a little baby thing

That made a woman cry."

Think about this church, here in this place. An idea in one man's mind: a dream discussed by a committee: a concept shared with a handful of little people. And two decades later a strong and healthy entity that has life and a history and permanence.

Think about Purdue University. An idea - a concept. And as the President of the United States recognized its retiring President he called attention to the fact that 80,000 men and women bear the marks of that idea - graduates of the last 25 years alone. That's a vivid example of the mustard seed principle.

The trouble with it is that we are very much inclined to be impressed with bigness. Size impresses us and we live in a nation and culture that worships volume. We measure success in terms of profits: we define the good life in terms of profits: we define the good life in terms of the size of a man's bank account and mortgage. We live in a system so big that descriptive statistics no longer make sense.

In things ecclesiastic we are inclined to use the same measuring stick. The viability of a church is determined not on the basis of what it is doing, but the size of its congregation and current receipts. Presbyterians are increasingly nervous over the fact that, as a denomination, we have been losing members for several years. In spite of the fact that the church has done more in terms of service, more in terms of expressing its faith in the difficult confines of the world, than at any other time in its history.

In discussions of the Angela Davis affair, the clinching argument is always that this thing is going to cost us people and money. And it may. But in the midst of it all - whether we agree with the action or disagree - isn't there reason to thank God that we belong to a church that takes its commission seriously to be in the world, as the Body of Christ: a church that will risk its life in pursuit of what it perceives to be the will of God. We may not always agree - but the fact that our church is that honest, and that courageous - is the reason why I'm a Presbyterian and not something else.

The Kingdom of God is something other than volume and size and bigness.

Jesus said that the Kingdom is like a seed sown, which grows quietly, inconspicuously. That is, it is not the nature of the Christian venture to be spectacular.

Bishop Gerald Kennedy tells the story of a cartoon published long ago on the anniversary of the birth of Abraham Lincoln. Two Kentucky backwoodsman are standing at the edge of a forest in the winter. Trees are bare and the ground is covered with snow. One asks the other, "Anything new?" The other replies, "Nothing much. Oh, there's a new baby over at Tom Lincoln's."

[p. 82 The Parables]

Like a seed planted in the ground the Christian venture has grown and continues to grow. But like the process by which a seed is transformed into a tree, the growth is many times imperceptible. We cannot see human growth and perhaps one of the most common human experiences is the surprise and sense of mysterious wonder when we encounter a child we have not seen for two years. Less romantic, of course, but equally common is that mysterious experience of putting on last year's pants and discovering that they no longer fit.

Personal growth, maturing, deepening in faith - follow the same pattern. Not long ago The Christian Century published a series of articles written by some of the leading theologians of our day entitled "How My Mind Has Changed." To a man, they had grown and altered and deepened some convictions while discarding others. To a man, they were embarrassed by books they had written early in their careers. To a man, they bore witness to the fact that they had grown.

That is how it is with personal Christian Faith - like a seed in the growth process. And there is nothing more difficult for us to assimilate than that understanding. We are impatient. We want results. We want answers to questions, now. We want a faith that exudes confidence and assurance. And in the dark valley of doubt and grief we sometimes envy the confidence of other people we know.

I'm suspicious of the man with all the answers. I think that is the tremendous appeal of the evangelistic approach to the Gospel. People emerge from conversion experiences with a full blown faith. And there is not possibility for growth, because a tree has been stuck in the ground instead of a seed.

The Kingdom of God, and that includes whatever you and I carry around in our hearts and call our faith, is a growing, living thing. It never stops growing and changing, and the moment it does, it is quite dead.

Finally, in these two parables Jesus was saying something about the location of the Kingdom of God. As the seed is in the ground, so God's Kingdom is in the common life of men. Not above, or beyond or apart but right in the middle of human life. That's one of the greatest affirmations in the New Testament, and one of the best bits of news I know. It is also one of the most difficult components of our faith to believe. The Kingdom of God has been portrayed vertically in terms of a place in the sky: it has been described horizontally as a life style cut off from the realities of the world. It is still maintained, in the personal dimension, that the things of the Kingdom are unsoiled by the ambiguities of the life you and I live. And citizens of this Kingdom often come out looking like those three little monkeys who see, hear and touch not evil - a dull life indeed.

The word here, however, is that God's Kingdom is in the world we know: that you and I live in that Kingdom, now: that it breaks through to us in the fellowship of the Church: in the love and affection of friends: in moments of awe and wonder and celebration.

It is here, even here, in our midst. "It is like the mustard seed, which is smaller than any seed in the ground when it is sown. But once sown, it springs up and grows taller than any other plant, and forms branches so large that the birds can settle in its shade."

Amen.